New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

Volume XV, Number 19 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 20, 1954

1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1953 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Can-Can	304
Charley's Aunt	179
Dead Pigeon	176
End as a Man	250
Fifth Season (The)	380
In the Summer House	168
John Murray Anderson's Almanac	191
Kind Sir	225
*Kismet	198
Late Love	258
Madam, Will You Walk	201
Me and Juliet	298
My 3 Angels	334
Oh, Men, Oh, Women!	184
Picnic	348
Prescott Proposals (The)	187
Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker (The)	165
Sabrina Fair	217
Sing Till Tomorrow	172
*Solid Gold Cadillac (The)	222
*Tea and Sympathy	266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254
Wonderful Town	344

•

1952 Vol.

Dial M for Murder	215
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186

•

1951 Vol.

King and I (The)	304

•

1949 Vol.

South Pacific	312

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 20, 1954

1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1954
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Abie's Irish Rose	248
All Summer Long	304
*Anniversary Waltz	339
*Bad Seed (The)	223
*Boy Friend (The)	299
Burning Glass (The)	357
By the Beautiful Sea	335
*Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)	382
Confidential Clerk (The)	370
Coriolanus	385
*Dear Charles	316
*Fanny	256
Fragile Fox	286
Girl in Pink Tights (The)	354
Girl on the Via Flaminia (The)	349
Golden Apple (The)	346
Hayride	319
His and Hers	393
Hit the Trail	228
Home Is the Hero	307
Immoralist (The)	373
King of Hearts	342
Living Room (The)	251
Lullaby	377
*Lunatics and Lovers	219
Mademoiselle Colombe	397
Magic and the Loss (The)	332
Midsummer Night's Dream (A)	311
*Mrs. Patterson	231
On Your Toes	289
Ondine	362
One Eye Closed	236
*Pajama Game (The)	324
*Peter Pan	273
*Quadrille	259
*Rainmaker (The)	264
*Reclining Figure	294
*Sandhog	239
Sea Gull (The)	327
Sing Me No Lullaby	279
Starcross Story (The)	390
*Tender Trap (The)	282
Traveling Lady (The)	267
*Wedding Breakfast	243
Winner (The)	365
*Witness for the Prosecution	216

CRTICS' CIRCLE AWARD 330

Theatre Openings

"The Bad Seed" "Lunatics and Lovers"
"Witness for the Prosecution"

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 20, 1954

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Witness for the Prosecution"

Daily Mirror
December 17, 1954

'Witness for Prosecution' Absorbing Melodrama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Gilbert Miller and Peter Saunders brought an absorbing melodrama called "Witness for the Prosecution" to Henry Miller's Theatre Thursday evening. Penned by Agatha Christie, it has already had a lengthy run in London. It proves that we don't always turn thumbs down on British theatrical imports.

Since "Witness for the Prosecution" packs plenty of surprises in its cargo of suspense, we shan't tell you too much about the plot. To do so would lessen your enjoyment of the new murder mystery, which we are reasonably certain you will be seeing as soon as tickets are available.

* * *

ANYWAY, IT HAS to do with a young and likable drifter accused of killing an elderly and wealthy woman. To the amazement of his clever counsel, his wife refuses to support his alibi under questioning. From then on, things take startling turns. Twists come at you so fast that you've hardly been chilled by one before you're shivering over another.

Robert Lewis, who won a lot of awards for staging "The Teahouse of the August Moon," has turned in another slick directorial job in this instance. Working with a large and skillful cast, he has kept the pressure on all the way, making arbitrary situations seem real, human and even humorous on occasion.

Francis L. Sullivan, one of our favorite actors, is terrific as the shrewd and witty counsel for the defense. You have to see him shudder, run his pudgy hand over his expressive face, at the annoying mannerisms of a less gifted opponent, to realize just what wonderful touches he brings to the part. This is one of the season's genuinely amusing performances.

Gene Lyons, whom you may have seen on many television programs, is an excellent example of the talent being trained for our stage via that medium. He is alternately amiable and hysterical, but always convincing as the ineffectual on trial for his life. He is fascinating in a bravura role.

"WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION"

Play by Agatha Christie; staged by Robert Lewis; scenery by Raymond Sovey; costumes by Kathryn Miller; presented by Gilbert Miller and Peter Saunders at Henry Miller's Theatre, December 16, 1954. The cast:

Carter.....Gordon Nelson
Greta.....Mary Barclay
Sir Wilfrid Robarts, Q.C.....
Francis L. Sullivan
Mr. Mayhew.....Robin Craven
Leonard Vole.....Gene Lyons
Inspector Hearne..Claude Horton
Plainclothes Detective.....
Ralph Leonard
Romaine.....Patricia Jessel
Third Juror.....Dolores Rashid
Second Juror....Andrew George
Foreman of the Jury..Jack Bittner
Court Usher.....Arthur Oshlag
Clerk of the Court..Ronald Dawson
Mr. Myers, Q.C.....Ernest Clark
Mr. Justice Wainwright.....
Horace Braham
Alderman.....R. Cobden-Smith
Judge's Clerk....Harold Webster
Court Stenographer..W. H. Thomas
Warder.....Ralph Roberts
Barrister.....Henry Craig Neslo
Barrister.....Brace Conning
Barrister.....Ruth Greene
Barrister.....Albert Richards
Barrister.....Franklyn Monroe
Barrister.....Sam Kramer
Policeman.....Bryan Herbert
Dr. Wyatt.....Guy Spaull
Janet Mackenzie...Una O'Connor
Mr. Clegg....Michael McAloney
The Other Woman..Dawn Steinkamp

PATRICIA JESSEL, an English actress who has run the gamut of Shakespearean characters, is electrifying as the wife, as menacing as a cobra one moment and as frantic as a lioness at bay the next. Her portrayal throws off icy sparks. After Miss Jessel has fulfilled her current commitment, we should like to see her in some of the Bard's plays which she has done at Stratford-on-Avon.

Ernest Clark is highly effective as a pompous and not very brilliant prosecutor. Una O'Connor, ornament of stage and screen, has a fine scene as a touchy and determined witness. Horace Braham is a joy to watch as a suave presiding judge. And Robin Craven, a dependable trouper, is good as a conscientious solicitor.

"Witness for the Prosecution" is a high-tension thriller. It held us spellbound through all its three acts, though we wondered if Miss Christie didn't ring the changes too rapidly at the end. But the lady with us liked them, and thinks you will, too.

We recommend it to all who aren't averse to sitting on the edge of their seats. And this, the Henry Miller's new occupant is guaranteed to do. For it's a platinum-plated whodunit.

DAILY NEWS
December 17, 1954

'Witness for Prosecution' Slick And Surprising Courtroom Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Agatha Christie has written more than 50 detective novels and a number of plays about the popular crime of murder. The latest stage work of this veteran of the whodunits, "Witness for the Prosecution," is one of her very best, and last evening Gilbert Miller gave it a slick production at Henry Miller's Theatre.

Telling the plot of such a play as this should be a felony and would be a dirty trick. Usually, in the case of these dramas—"The Bad Seed," for instance, or any of the works of J. B. Priestley—there is a surprise ending, and if the ending is really a surprise and not something you guessed all along, the piece is a success. There are three surprises in the final moments of "Witness for the Prosecution," and I enjoyed them all.

I enjoyed the whole thing. It starts off with an open-faced young man being accused of bashing in the head of a woman who has befriended him—a woman older than he is. He puts himself in the hands of a wily lawyer. There is a trial, with the usual parade of witnesses to the stand. The witness for the prosecution is the young man's wife. Normally a wife can't testify against a husband, but in this case she can because their marriage isn't legal.

Finish Is Slick

The machinery of a courtroom play doesn't vary much from year to year; there are no new superstreamlined, wrap-around windshielded, 250-h.p. models. In the whodunit it is the finish that counts—the attention to detail. The finish of "Witness" is satiny and splendid, thanks to the original craftiness of Miss Christie, to the direction by Robert Lewis and to the smooth playing of a top-flight cast.

Francis L. Sullivan is immense, both physically and artistically, as the lawyer who takes on a boyish client because he believes him innocent. In court, he conducts his case by waving a big white pencil much as Toscanini orders events with a slim black baton. He is suave, ponderous and thoroughly enjoyable.

Miss Jessel a Hit

In the title role is an actress new to these shores, Patricia Jessel, and I hope she will remain with us a long time. Her part is the key to the play, and she performs it flawlessly. Just how well she performs it you will discover as the events of the evening approach their close.

There are no indifferent actors in "Witness for the Prosecution," for they have been properly cast and most ingeniously directed by Lewis. Any director can invent stage business for a play, but only a good one like Lewis can make the business important to and a part of the plot.

Gene Lyons, as the young defendant, is admirable in his declarations of innocence and in his unbelieving shock when his wife testifies against him. Ernest Clark has fine, dry humor as the prosecutor, and so does Horace Braham as the judge. Among the interesting witnesses who come to the stand are Una O'Connor as a testy old housekeeper, Michael McAloney as a sniffish police laboratory technician and Guy Spaull as a medical examiner. Robin Craven is helpful as Sullivan's law associate. The two sets by Raymond Sovey—a law office and a courtroom—are practical and sufficient.

If you feel like staying awake until 11 o'clock some night, Henry Miller's Theatre is a good place to do it.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 17, 1954

THEATER

'Witness For the Prosecution'

By WALTER F. KERR

For the Defense

IF the mere raising of the question "Where were you on the night of October fourteenth?" causes you acute pain and sends you back to your unread volumes of Proust, then "Witness for the Prosecution" is not for you. That little business about who was where at what time on October the fourteenth turns up say, eight or ten times during the bewigged courtroom inquisition at the Miller.

If, on the other hand, you have an eternally unsatisfied passion for the niceties of crime, if you have an unslakable thirst for the ferretting out of wonderfully tangled facts, if you have an honest man's yen for the figure that slips silently into an impenetrable London fog—if, in short, you have a soul—then hurry right over to the Henry Miller. The old-fashioned, barefaced, honest-to-goodness murder mystery is back in business.

It all starts with an encouraging little note in the program: "The audience is requested not to divulge the solution of the plot to those who have not seen the play." It's been some years since a producer cared so little for his own sophistication as to drop this kind of come-on into type. It's also been some years since the phrase was anything but a wistful hope that the entire audience wouldn't catch on to the whole farrago fifteen minutes after the curtain was up.

But not this time. Agatha Christie is the author of "Witness for the Prosecution," and Miss Christie must have been saving up surprises for—well, months and months. The play starts out as a fairly calm, fairly routine cat-and-mouse case of law. A middle-aged spinster has been bashed behind the ear with, I believe, a 'cosh.' A young married man who's been visiting her, and who stands to inherit her tidy estate, is quickly suspected. His wife is his only alibi. And his wife turns out to be quite a queer customer, not precisely the witness you'd want testifying in your defense.

The second act is straight question-and-answer business on the witness stand, with barristers leering, huffing, snarling, and pouting, witnesses being trapped in huge, handsome lies, the defendant beating his breast and banging his fist on the box. It's strictly "Good Lord, do you mean—?" dialogue, followed by murmurs of "Incredible, quite incredible." In Miss Christie's adroit hands, the fascination of the puzzle is mounting, though, and men of good will are hanging on every word.

In the last round, Miss Christie lets loose her haymakers. There's not just one corkscrew twist of a finish—there are three of them. And it's all done with such dedicated conviction, such patient plausibility, such respect for the medium as a thing of beauty that you're apt to find yourself gasping out loud with the same simple, stunned, limpid pleasure you took in your first encounter with "The Sign of the Four."

• • •

Robert Lewis has directed a tight, tingling, briskly intelligent performance. Francis L. Sullivan toys with the role of an oversize barrister as though he were opening a series of succulent oysters. The sighs, grunts, mumbles, and snorts are delectable in themselves. Patricia Jessel, repeating the role she created in London, is the tense, frigidly composed, finally hysterical wife. As a trick performance, this is likely to be the talk of the season; but there's more than trickery in it—it's honest and sometimes moving playing.

Una O'Connor has a delightfully welcome single scene as a tart Scotswoman who doesn't mind rebuking a judge. Gene Lyon brings a nervous jauntiness to the difficult role of the man on trial, and Ernest Clark, Robin Craven, Horace Graham, and Guy Spaull are all impeccable in lesser, but eminently actable, parts. Miss Christie's prose is not immortal, but she knows how to shape a scene, how to make a silence explode like a time-bomb, how to make customers sit up and take intriguing nonsense for nourishment.

Unless we lovers of the detective story are a dying, dessicated breed, "Witness for the Prosecution" should be a walloping success.

Journal American
December 17, 1954

A Mystery 'Knockout'

Miss Christie's Shocker Import Seen as Big Gold-Filled Hit

By JOHN McCLAIN

GILBERT MILLER took a severe battering a few weeks ago with "The Living Room," but last night he got up off the floor and brought in another British import, "Witness for the Prosecution," by Agatha Christie, and scored a decisive knockout. This one should pay for the other and leave all concerned with enough money to giggle at the income tax collector.

Miss Christie, a most generous writer with three hits running currently in London, has here delivered an ingenious and skillfully contrived shocker. Robert Lewis has directed it with subtlety and imagination and Francis L. Sullivan, Patricia Jessel, Ernest Clark, Gene Lyons and Una O'Connor, aided by an immaculate supporting cast, have given it the triumphant performances it deserves. This is a big hit.

First night clients at the Henry Miller were asked not to give away the punch finish, and I am happy to comply. Let it be stated, however, that the genesis of Miss Christie's meanderings concerns the trial of a young man accused of the murder of a wealthy widow, and the inventive method by which the witness for the prosecution achieves his acquittal. It may also be stated, in the sacred bonds of criticism, that the play might be just as good without the punch-PUNCH ending.

Carries Play

Be that as it may, which may be for the rest of the season at least, there is no gainsaying the ponderous and always authoritative acting of Francis Sullivan, as the counselor for the defense. You see these highly capable artisans in lots of movies and you begin to forget that they were, and will always remain, first lords of the footlights. Sullivan's voice has a resonance that projects his whisper to the cheapest seats, his hefty gestures are timed with eloquence. He carries the play.

Romping around his facade is a newcomer named Patricia Jessel, who was brought over from the British company. One usually wonders why this effort was made with so many competent American actresses looking for work, but in this instance the answer is implicit in the play.

Add to these Una O'Connor, a face familiar to many, in a delightful few moments; and the steady and thoroughly professional services of Ernest Clark, as the Prosecutor; and Gene Lyons, as the accused, and you are sure to have the ingredients of a solid evening.

As ever, Gilbert Miller has given it a plush production. Raymond Sovey's sets appear to be solidly built and bear the mark of authenticity; the Old Bailey, necessarily foreshortened, still looks legitimate, and it is peopled with enough actors (good, too!) to lend corollary importance to the trial scenes.

This is a fine murder mystery and you should go to see it. I just think it lasted about one minute too long.

The New York Times

December 17, 1954

Theatre: Murder Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN the program for "Witness for the Prosecution," which opened at Henry Miller's Thursday evening, the instructions to the theatregoers are as follows: "The audience is requested not to divulge the solution of the plot to those who have not seen the play."

Nothing said in this column will in any way embarrass the rather ample management of the Agatha Christie mystery show. But it is fair to point out that "Witness for the Prosecution" is skillfully written, neatly directed and extremely well acted, by Francis L. Sullivan and Patricia Jessel in particular. The solution is the management's secret. But the ingenuity of play and performance is bound to leak out somewhere.

A supercilious young man of no visible merit is charged with the murder of a wealthy woman of middle years who had willed him a fortune. Learned counsel, in this case Sir Wilfrid Robarts, Q. C., believes in his innocence. But his only alibi is the word of his wife that he returned home a few minutes before the murder was committed. She promises to testify to that effect. But in the dock she repudiates the story and charges him with the murder.

This is the point where the management says: "Tut tut!" For the solution is the twist that makes Miss Christie's mystery exciting. But all mysteries are cat-and-mouse ballets, and the skill of the performance is as significant as the material. In this instance, the skill is of first rank for the genre. Raymond Sovey has provided two sets that represent the grim respectability of British justice. And Robert Lewis has staged a subtly amusing performance that gets though the languors on its wits and rises with enthusiasm to the big scenes of betrayal and vengeance.

•

As counsel for the defense: Francis L. Sullivan, corpulent, bland, Mephistophelian. Mr. Sullivan is a show in his own right. He is paid for his performance. But anyone who can act with so much relish ought to be willing to play this part free, it is so rich and copious. As learned counsel Mr. Sullivan approaches the case with weary patience over the tiresome follies of mankind.

In the courtroom when he is rising to a point of order he is insufferably condescending, and he can even manage to blush when a point of law goes against him. Despite his technical skill, sardonic humor radiates from paunch and jowl. Mr. Sullivan's grand manner never looks solemn. As counsel for the defense he gives a vastly entertaining performance.

•

As the faithless wife of the accused, Miss Jessel gives an equally skillful performance that has a wide range from severity to passion and ferocity. The part is complicated, but Miss Jessel has all the variety and assurance it needs. Gene Lyons is also excellent as the worthless young man who seems not to comprehend the trouble he is in. Una O'Connor as a garrulous and temperamental house servant; Robin Craven as a thoroughly proper barrister, and Horace Braham as a fatherly presiding judge give entertaining performances. As the hatefully pompous attorney for the prosecution, Ernest Clark is in top form, too. His pedantic mannerisms show that ice water is circulating in his high-born veins.

Those are the principal actors. But it takes thirty actors to find out whether the accused is innocent or guilty. Many of them, as in the case of "The Caine Mutiny Court Martial," look grave, wear expensive costumes, smile wanly at the feeble jokes and never say a word. You can't economize on manpower in courtroom plays.

At present, three plays by Agatha Christie are on view in London. The one we have in New York is a first-rate sample.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 17, 1954

Christie Mystery 100% Entertainment

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

For sheer, unadulterated entertainment there is nothing around town to equal "Witness for the Prosecution," the suspenseful courtroom drama that opened at the Henry Miller last night.

Surely Agatha Christie is responsible for more mystery stories and plays than anyone else alive. This time she has surpassed even herself for ingenuity and excitement.

In the past couple of minutes before the final curtain, the playwright springs three complete jolting switches on her plot, any one alone of which would have justified the play.

They are alarming and convincing. It is impossible to imagine anyone guessing what this mistress of playwriting witchcraft has been up to until she makes it all come clear.

Murder Suspense.

The drama begins with a young man of shallow charm telling a lawyer that his wife suspects he will be arrested for murder. A woman in her 50s has become involved with him in a casual friendship, which developed to the point where she has left him all her fortune. Now she has been killed.

When the wife appears on the scene, the trickery of the design becomes really evident. You are not quite sure how much of the young man's charm to believe, nor are you certain exactly what his wife is up to, because she seems to create deliberately false impressions.

The audience's sympathy swings back and forth, for and against the man on trial. You see him in the court, and in swift fashion the kernel of both arguments is related.

At the beginning of the third act there is a new issue raised in the person of a cheap blonde who turns up with some incriminating letters.

Truth Unveiled.

In the final scene the truth is unveiled in a manner which anchors your sympathies permanently, while it dazzles you with surprises.

Francis L. Sullivan plays the defense attorney, swinging his vast bulk through the courtroom, with lazy good humor that masks a shrewd operator.

As the puzzling wife, Patricia Jessel gives an extremely effective, clean-cut performance. She performs with great economy, accuracy and honesty. After all the switches of the play, she leaves you with the feeling that she has played absolutely fair.

Ernest Clark extracts a good deal of humor out of his role as the prosecutor, who sooner or later gets bested by his opponent or the judge, every time.

Fine Melodrama.

Gene Lyons plays the man on trial with a fine show of melodrama, and Una O'Connor contributes a gem of clear characterization as the salty housekeeper of the murdered woman.

Mystery plays are bound to have talky passages, because there is so much retrospective explanation necessary. Robert Lewis has kept "Witness for the Prosecution" moving at an intelligent rate without ever straining.

This is a play that asks not one thing from you except to keep your eyes and ears reasonably open. It is grand, tingling fun.

New York Post

December 17, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Mystery Melodrama at Its Best

The murder-mystery melodrama may not be the highest form of theatrical art, but, when things are working properly, nothing can be more fun. And Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution," which opened last night at the Henry Miller, is an example of this tricky and deceptive craft at its best. No doubt it is just a stunt, or rather a series of them, but they are so deftly managed by Miss Christie and a splendid cast, and the audience befuddlement is so successful, that the result is the most delightful achievement of its kind in years.

The English are the acknowledged masters at this sort of trickery, and Agatha Christie, when she is right, is the most artful of them all. In "Witness for the Prosecution," she is at the top of her excellence, and she has combined the guile of the murder mystery with the quietly deadly suspense of the British courtroom melodrama in the most satisfactory fashion imaginable. Then, just when it is time for the solution of the case to arrive, which is the most perilous moment for such works, she comes up with a multiple stunt that is unbeatable.

Being Fooled

Of course, I won't tell you what it is. I can't imagine anyone so base that he would reveal the series of secrets that Miss Christie has to unfold. Let me merely say that, when I saw "Witness for the Prosecution" in London last summer, I had been warned to beware of her, and I regard myself as something of an amateur expert in such matters, but I was completely and happily fooled. And I hope it is worth adding that last night, when I knew what was coming, I had almost every bit as good a time watching how she went about it. I think she's wonderful.

It is, I'm sure, safe to tell you just a little of what takes place. A pleasant young man is accused of the murder of an elderly woman who had befriended him, and is brought to trial at the Old Bailey. His only alibi can be provided by his wife, whom he had saved from the Russian zone in Berlin, and the defense attorneys are counting heavily on her evidence. Will she come to his rescue, as he had come to hers? Well, there is something a trifle sinister about her, and the chief attorney is somewhat worried. I won't say he hasn't reason to be.

In Court

For Americans, there is something particularly satisfying dramatically about the ancient formality of English courtroom procedure, and Miss Christie, in addition to her guilefulness as a spinner of enigmas, knows how to take advantage of such procedure for the purposes of humor as well as puzzlement. It is fun to see the battle of the attorneys and the calm irony of the judge. But the mystery is, of course, the main thing, and I'll give you only one piece of advice. Don't trust the playwright any more than you do her characters. I'll bet she outwits you.

The acting, save conceivably in the case of Gene Lyons as the hapless defendent, is everything it should be. Patricia Jessel is nothing short of perfect as the enigmatic wife, and Francis L. Sullivan as the chief defense attorney, Ernest Clark as the prosecutor, Horace Braham as the judge and Una O'Connor as a witness couldn't be improved upon. Nor could the minor witnesses and the lesser courtroom figures. I suppose a mystery melodrama like "Witness for the Prosecution" is a game rather than a play in any formal sense. But it's theatrical skulduggery at its peak.

"Lunatics and Lovers"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 14, 1954

Ribald Farce Hits Fast and Funny Clip

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Those small hotels on the fringes of Times Square have often provided the theater with colorful material. One of them is at it again, in "Lunatics and Lovers" at the Broadhurst.

Sidney Kingsley has deserted his familiar dramatic ground to spin a farce about a crew of side-street characters. When it is truly farcical it is very, very funny and inclined to be ribald. When it relaxes it gets very talky.

"Lunatics and Lovers" is chiefly about marriage and how to stay in it, or stay out of it. The turmoil takes place in the suite of one Dan Cupid, who waters down expensive perfume, deals in French postcards and loves the dames and the geegees.

He is joyfully anxious to live and let live. But he is also anxious to stay out of the taxing toils of the federal government. To accomplish this he must keep an alcoholic judge mated, happy and influential.

Since the judge's girl has got herself a rich though still married prospect, it is a natural progression that the judge should make a play for the prospect's wife. When the two gents eventually go into mortal combat, everybody is brought to his limited senses.

Even Cupid decides to marry the call girl who has fought to save him from the law. And everybody has the right partner for the finis.

This is not much of a story. But it is a play of manner and point of view, rather than narrative. It lacks a full quota of physical riot and momentum. But its funny moments are hysterically bawdy, and when it is played with heart it has its fascinating fun.

Dennis King is starred as the judge. He portrays his seedy, bibulous elegance in grand style.

Sheila Bond has her own special effulgence onstage, which she turns on once more as an earthy Venus, out for an honest buck.

Vicki Cummings is a slithery broad, who deserts the judge for gold. And the married couple whose lives are straightened out the hard way are played by Mary Anderson and Arthur O'Connell, whose harassment is devastating. Nat Cantor is a consistent laugh producer as Cupid's pal, a much-read pseudoscientist.

"LUNATICS AND LOVERS"

Play by Sidney Kingsley; staged by Mr. Kingsley; designed and lighted by Frederick Fox; presented by May Kirshner at the Broadhurst Theatre, December 13, 1954. The cast:

Dan Cupid.....Buddy Hackett
Joe Gonz.....Nat Cantor
Sable Wellington....Sheila Bond
Waiter.....Maurice Brenner
Judge Sullivan.....Dennis King
Desiree.....Vicki Cummings
Will Harrison..Arthur O'Connell
Marian Harrison..Mary Anderson
Policeman.....James Nolan
House Detective...George Tyne
Hotel Manager..Fairfax Burgher
Bellboy.....Maurice Brenner
Bride.....Lynn Merrill
Groom.....Rex Partington
Bridesmaid.....Donna Pearson

Daily Mirror
December 14, 1954

'Lunatics and Lovers' Galloping Farce

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Lunatics and Lovers," which M. Kirshner brought to the Broadhurst Theatre Monday evening, shows author Sidney Kingsley in a new light. For, in this instance the gifted dramatist, who in his time has won a Pulitzer Prize or two for his serious plays, has penned an unabashed farce about amiable rogues and floozies.

IT IS REMINISCENT of "Guys and Dolls," sans music. It has to do with a small-time racketeer who has a knack for counterfeiting perfumes and an aversion to paying income taxes. With the law breathing down his neck, he discovers that his friend, Judge Sullivan, a bibulous fixer, is unable to function because his girl friend is threatening to marry a dyspeptic dentist.

So the minor-league larceny artist pulls a party in his fleabag hotel suite, hoping that booze and laughs will inspire him with an idea to beat the rap. A brawl breaks out, with profitable consequences. The judge gets his girl-friend back, the dentist and his frau are reunited, and the pudgy prankster finds himself engaged to wed a sentimental and well-heeled honey.

Now, farce is usually incredible, and when you don't really believe in characters it's hard to accept what they do. But it seems to us that Kingsley's farcical characters have a goodly measure of reality about them, so much so that you care more than a little for their fumblings and foibles. And laugh a lot—with as well as at them.

IT'S THE WACKY kind of script that George Abbott stages so expertly. However, the versatile Kingsley himself is no mean hand at directing. True, he **misses a few yaks in the first act,** due to over-pacing and pushing, but the second canto clicks like a car powered by one of those new wonder gases.

Dennis King, who can range from Shakespeare through Shaw to Kingsley in a robust and ribald mood, is quite convincing and likable as the amorous legal-eagle. Buddy Hackett, graduate of the borscht circuit and bistros, is most engaging as the Mr. Five-by-Five con man. Sheila Bond, a solid trouper in our book, is excellent as usual as the bad girl with a good heart.

Vicki Cummings, another solid sender, is equally admirable as a shrewd girl with a bad heart. Mary Anderson, who scared the daylight out of us some semesters back as an adolescent fiend in "Guest in the House," brings heart and humor to a wife with a voice that ranges from soprano down to an Ezio Pinza bass. And salutes should go to Arthur O'Connell, James Nolan and Nat Cantor in other roles.

THE AMAZING Frederick Fox **has designed another clever setting.**

"Lunatics and Lovers" took quite a spell getting on a lunatic and lovelorn beam. But when it did, it galloped like a firehorse at the smell of smoke.

If some of the principals stepped on their own laughs in the early stanzas, they certainly cashed in on them as the chuckle-provoker zoomed along to a hectic and hilarious climax. PS: This one is not for the kids.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**
December 14, 1954

THEATER

'Lunatics and Lovers'

By WALTER F. KERR

The $64 Subject

Sidney Kingsley's intentions in writing the new room-and-bath farce at the Broadhurst are wonderfully honorable. All Mr. Kingsley has set out to do is write a nice raffish, rakish, rowdy, low-down haymaker about a lot of splendidly seedy people who have equal portions of lust and larceny in their hearts.

He can't do it, though. Somewhere in Mr. Kingsley there lurks a gentleman, a sentimental scholar, perhaps even a family man. He has no sooner set his side-of-the-mouth gang to waltzing shamelessly about the precincts of a laissez-faire hotel on 48th St.—at one early point two of his more flamboyant tintypes manage to inhabit the same bathtub—than hearts of gold start popping up. First thing you know, "Lunatics and Lovers" is really on the side of virtue, the sort of theatrical virtue that put an 'I-didn't-mean-it' tag after every stretch of ribaldry, and the brassy comedy begins to look a little more like tin. The central problem, as the piece finally works out, is how to keep a quite innocent wife from being seduced so that she can go back to her nondescript husband; and the flashiest little doll in the place is the one who runs interference for marriage, morality, and the finer things of life. You just can't trust these assorted bums and babes.

It's too bad that the author has cheated on his jaundiced point of view—mixing the sly and the soft-hearted in a single brew—because it conventionalizes his people and his materials. Shortly after they stop leering and begin exhibiting standard domestic traits, you suddenly recognize them from quite a few other shows: the tipsy dignitary with a taste for spouting poetry; the kept cookie who is really a housewife at heart; the sheepish fellow who has latched onto a blonde beyond his emotional means; the two-bit operator who shrills a kind of Runyonese; the inexperienced wife who decides to have a little fling at living. The plot devices start to look familiar, too: the machinery that sets things humming is the business of trapping a judge in amorous embrace, popping a flashbulb, and threatening to make headlines in the morning papers—a bit of machinery that made money for a lot of musical-comedy librettists in the '20s and '30s. In short a promising foray into a vivid comic jungle has somehow dwindled into a fairly tame, slightly reminiscent, finally effortful hotel-room comedy.

This is additionally a pity because Mr. Kingsley is capable of caustic humor. "Back to your bathtub, you two-bit Ondine," snarls an alarmed perfume 'importer.' "Three more sincere people in this city and the streets will be running with blood!" bellows the same fellow during a later contretemps. There is a very funny sequence involving an interrupted bubble-bath, and a handful of skillful comedians have now and then been given items to work with.

Dennis King, for instance, is the boozy official with an Irish brogue and he is royally amusing as he wades into a bathtub for a spot of coffee, as he sneaks into a dance-step while promising to behave himself, as he preens himself loftily when some one points out that he "ain't no bum." Buddy Hackett, a new entertainer just in from the cabarets, brims with beady-eyed anguish and erupts in sputtering outrage ("Sue me—I'm a degenerate!"), making the most of a bit in which he masterminds an assignation while hidden behind a door. Sheila Bond is just fine as she hikes her eyebrows even higher than her stratospheric voice, and I especially liked a moment in which she completed a mysterious phone call by identifying herself as "Anonymous." Vicki Cummings, with a flaming red dress to fill in under the pearls, is as joyously accomplished as ever, Mary Anderson exploits an attic-to-basement voice for maximum effect, and Arthur O'Connell works very hard indeed in a role that leaves him no alternative. Frederick Fox's set—everything from a corridor to a practical tub, with green and red neons poking in through the ceiling—is a pleasantly stylized comment on its own.

But the author means too well to see a really abandoned satirical lark through to a prankish end. He isn't enough of a hoodlum at heart to get under these on-the-town hides. Everybody winds up straining.

New York Post

December 14, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Farce Having to Do With Sex

Sidney Kingsley, an expert man of the theater, has assembled a rowdy and dynamic sex farce called "Lunatics and Lovers," which opened last night at the Broadhurst. It seems to have been collected, whittled down and joined together, rather than written, and the marks of its mechanical fabrication are sometimes much too evident, but the sheer force of its vitality, raucousness and hearty animal-spirits gives it a certain inescapable comic gusto. Its tendency is to beat you into accepting its hilarity, instead of winning you over artfully.

Taste is assuredly not one of its strong points. But, then, that is not its intention. Despite various advance comparisons to Aristophenes and Moliere, all that Mr. Kingsley appears to have set out to do is to provide improvisations on the theme of illicit sex in New York and to make them as broad, explicit and outspoken as possible. No one can accuse him of going in for double meanings. There is only one meaning to "Lunatics and Lovers," and its frankness is one of its most commendable and disarming traits.

The Variations

It is also to the play's credit that it proudly labels itself a "farce," although what else it could be called is certainly beyond me. There is no doubt that it strains and toils and raises its voice, and, particularly in the first of its two acts, it gives signs of standing noisily in one place for rather too long. But, by dint of going into all conceivable variations on its theme until it often seems an anthology of available sex gags, and adding to it most of the gusto and directorial expertness at Mr. Kingsley's command, it improves as it goes on.

There is no particular reason for trying to tell much of its plot. I imagine it is enough to say that it gathers together in one hotel suite various raffish characters, including a couple of racketeers, a prostitute or two, an amorous judge and a philandering husband, adds the innocent and angry wife of the philanderer to represent the eccentric forces of virtue, and goes in for the innumerable farcical inventions that come to the author's fertile imagination and keen memory. Meanwhile, the virtuous wife keeps her assailed honor intact.

The Comparisons

During the course of the evening, a fairly steady playgoer is likely to find himself noting similarities to all sorts of previous theatrical works, including "Room Service" and a non-musical "Guys and Dolls." Mr. Kingsley's editorial viewpoint combines an admiring benevolence toward the raffishness of mankind with a careful regard for the wifely virtues, and he is certainly too frank to be accused of leering. He can be very funny upon occasion, but I couldn't help wishing that he wasn't quite so mechanical about it.

It is acted in a good farcical spirit. I particularly liked the playing of Sheila Bond, who gives an engaging sweetness to the role of a sentimental tart right out of "Guys and Dolls," and Mary Anderson, once the memorable villainess of "Guest in the House," who now portrays the representative of virtue and achieves a fine comic effect by occasional use of an astonishing deep voice. Dennis King as the judge, Buddy Hackett as an amiable racketeer, and Arthur O'Connell as the husband are excellent. The gusto of "Lunatics and Lovers" is worthy of approval, but I'm afraid too much of it is pretty laborious.

DAILY NEWS

December 14, 1954

More Guys and Dolls, All Amusing, In Kingsley's 'Lunatics and Lovers'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is enough hilarity in Sidney Kingsley's first farce, "Lunatics and Lovers," to satisfy anybody, and in its first performance last evening the play kept the audience in a genial uproar a large part of the time. A good bit of the fun comes from the Kingsley script, but more of it comes from fine and daffy performances by such experts as Dennis King, Buddy Hackett, Vicki Cummings, Sheila Bond and Mary Anderson.

It is difficult to imagine that this prize-winning dramatist and melodramatist could become the author and director of a piece that is frankly unimportant, quite giddy and slightly naughty—but he has turned the trick. "Lunatics and Lovers" is not a gem among farces, for it does slow up now and again, but it is welcome entertainment.

Guys and Dolls Again

The play has a kind of Damon Runyon background as it tells of the goings-on in the two-room-and-bath suite in a Broadway hotel of a character bearing the improbable name of Dan Cupid. The man who plays this part, Buddy Hackett, is just as improbable. He is round and fat and he talks perfect Broadwayese (or Runyonese, anyhow) out of the side of his mouth in a squeaky voice. He is a very, very funny low comedian.

This character, who sleeps by day and schemes by night, works hard at turning a dishonest dollar—peddling counterfeit perfumes, for instance. When an excessively shapely broad, Miss Bond, plaintively inquires why he doesn't try to be like other people, he says he doesn't want to because he has seen other people and he doesn't like them.

A Chummy Judge

Most of this character's cronies are con men and shady ladies, but one of them is a politically powerful and highly alcoholic Irish judge—a bull butterfly, Miss Cummings calls him. Here is the most consistently artful performance in the play, Dennis King being the performer. I have seen Dennis excel in many types of roles, dramatic and musical; this is a new type for him, and he makes it his own. Quite an actor, this boy, as you will discover early in the evening when Mr. King is introduced to Miss Bond while she is taking a bubble bath in Mr. Hackett's b. r. King, feeling chummy, takes off shoes and socks, rolls up his pants and steps in with Miss Bond with magisterial aplomb.

The plot concern's Hackett's efforts to fix the judge up with a new broad, or canary, since he has been jilted by Miss Cummings, his old one. Into affairs somehow comes a lady—Miss Anderson. Married. Two children. But has quarreled with husband. Husband (Arthur O'Connell) gets mixed up with Miss Cummings. Wife, out of spite, decides to raise hell with judge, but judge tries to go too far. Cops are called. And that's about it, except for tying up the loose ends, pairing everybody off happily and getting the curtain down.

I think Kingsley should get his curtain down quicker. He takes too much time tying up the loose ends when everybody already knows how the play is going to turn out. Even so, "Lunatics and Lovers" is funny enough. Miss Cummings and Miss Bond are experienced performers as broads, and Miss Anderson is delightful as the outraged wife. Frederick Fox has designed a lively hotel suite for the action, including the bathroom.

The New York Times
December 14, 1954

Theatre: Kingsley's Farce

By BROOKS ATKINSON

RENOUNCING gravity for the moment, Sidney Kingsley has written a farce. "Lunatics and Lovers," which opened at the Broadhurst Monday evening, is in the tradition of "Up In Mabel's Room" and "Getting Gertie's Garter."

Mr. Kingsley is recording the bedlam of life inside a Forty-eighth Street hotel inhabited by small-time racketeers, strumpets and their respectable victims. In point of fact, "Lunatics and Lovers" is the story of a broken suburban marriage that is mended by a wild night in a hotel suite. The dentist and his estranged wife are very happy to resume suburban domesticity after a glimpse of night life in the company of bums.

But Mr. Kingsley is really interested in the hubbub of a funny show—some Damon Runyon characters talking racetrack vernacular, fantastic situations, including impromptu conferences and a bubble-bath in the bathroom, and the final explosion of a drunken brawl, formally attended by the police. An old hand at the mechanics of the theatre, Mr. Kingsley does contrive some comic scenes, especially those presided over by Buddy Hackett.

For Mr. Hackett is a large, soft, messy comic with a glib tongue and a pair of inquiring eyes. He plays the part of a crooked epicurian who believes in booze, dames, rackets and life that begins after sundown. It is the best part Mr. Kingsley has written, in terms of comic characterization and impudent dialogue, and Mr. Hackett plays it with exuberance.

•

The immortal farces, like "Three Men on a Horse" and "Room Service," race along with a kind of desperate logic that is fabulously funny. "Lunatics and Lovers" does not develop that giddy sort of speed. Although Mr. Kingsley is an able workman, he is not really light-minded, and his entertainment breathes hard in the stretches. Toward the end there are scenes when it is less farcical than dramatic, for the characters finally comfort each other in a romantic situation.

Some good actors wear Mr. Kingsley's motley with skill and good nature. To provide an appropriate area for carnival, Frederick Fox has designed a standard hotel suite with all the gaudy splendor of Broadway blinking nervously out the window. The bathroom, complete with oriental tub and washbowl, is imposing and hygienic in the best tradition of our land.

Dennis King, who is the star, plays a battered Irish judge with ironic magniloquence—the gestures broad and the vocal tones rolling. Sheila Bond and Vicki Cummings play trollops in different income brackets. As the suburban wife, Mary Anderson has her moments of bombastic virtue, for Miss Anderson has an unexpected base note in her voice that is funny. Arthur O'Connell is amusingly harassed as the husband who has stepped off over his head in the squalors of Broadway.

But it is Nat Cantor, as a philosophical felon, and Mr. Hackett who have the raciest parts. They are genuinely funny in their street-corner innocence about the good and the beautiful. As his own director, Mr. Kingsley has kept the pace of the performance breathless and the tone loud. There is some funny stuff in "Lunatics and Lovers." Unfortunately, there is some labored stuff, too.

Journal-American
December 14, 1954

Farce Fails To Hit Mark

Kingsley Pitch for Comedy Is Funny But Not Theatre

By JOHN McCLAIN

SIDNEY KINGSLEY is a highly successful playwright, a studious craftsman in the world of drama, but there are certain things he can't do. Last night he unveiled a farce called "Lunatics and Lovers," which he wrote, directed and co-produced at the Broadhurst Theatre, and I'm afraid he missed the mark.

He has been eminently recognized for plays of some social significance and for straight melodrama, and it is understandable that he'd make a pitch for comedy.

With this effort he proves that he can write any number of funny lines, some of them slightly reminiscent, but they are all strung together with such abandon that we come away with little interest in who delivers them, or why.

The basis for good farce, it says here, depends on the establishment of a rational situation—after which the crazier you get the better. In "Lunatics and Lovers" it didn't seem to me he ever quite sold us the premise.

Timely Gags

There is a Broadway character living in a West Side hotel, an operator who pushes phony perfume; there is an alcoholic judge; a young lady of professionally easy virtue; a slightly older lady who maintains her amateur standing in the same profession; a dentist, and his wife. Trouble is we never get beneath the surface of these people; they deliver limitless and very timely gags in the current idiom but we don't quite care.

We are never made to feel any real interest in whether the Runyon figure gets off with the hustler, whether the judge returns to his mistress, or vice versa, or whether the dentist is reunited with his wife.

Without some such intimate association with the principals we are left with a hollow evening; lots of people say many comic things, but it is like going to some small night club and witnessing the performances of a series of comedians. Amusing, yes; theatre, no.

This does not detract from a memorable delineation by Buddy Hackett, as Dan Cupid, the Broadway character—I laughed at practically everything he said, but I never believed he was real.

This goes, in a lesser degree, for Sheila Bond; she was the hooker in the story. She played her part wonderfully well, and I thought Mr. Kingsley came closest to making her come to life. Dennis King, as Judge Sullivan, was an entirely ridiculous figure, and some of his off-center remarks were embarrassing, but he should be awarded a varsity letter for giving it the full try.

Vicki Cummings did her talented best as the judge's keptie who saw a chance for true romance, and Arthur O'Connell scored as the belabored dentist.

Mary Anderson, cast as the dentist's wife, had the most thankless chore of the evening, and I do not think she will cherish these clippings forever. Not this one, anyway.

There was something mechanically wrong with the show which can be blamed on Kingsley, the writer, the director, or the producer. Frederick Fox, the designer, built a perfectly workable set, but at several points some of the characters disappeared entirely behind a bathroom, and reappeared only when needed. Maybe everybody's carried away with this "one set" idea.

Sidney Kingsley writes such good straight plays—I wish he'd stay with them.

"The Bad Seed"

Journal American

December 9, 1954

'Shocker' Proves a Hit

Anderson Play Well Written And Acted in Superior Style

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS is being written under a form of duress, as I have just come from a Tex and Jinx radio program in which I broadcast some quick reactions to "The Bad Seed," the new Maxwell Anderson play which opened at the Forty-sixth St. Theatre last night.

As I recall, I said I thought the play was a hit, and that it was a good example of straight and skillful writing. I don't think I had time to make the point, but I also wished to say that it was wonderfully well acted.

"The Bad Seed" is a strictly professional endeavor all around. Mr. Anderson, never having turned his hand to horror before, has come up with the tale of a little monster who has murdered three people, all the while ensconsed in a gentle household. The problem arises: is it heredity or environment?

Sustained Action

It turns out that the kid's mother understands the hereditary psychopathic streak, and she does her best to obliterate it in the end.

This is a play which marches from its first moments through two acts and eight scenes of well-sustained suspense. These are believable people, and we accept the normal stature of this little eight-year-old in an average home.

Then it becomes obvious that this is not just an orthodox child: a fellow student has beaten her out for the penmanship medal and his body is fished out of the lake the next day; the only material witness dies in a pyre of burning excelsior.

Worth the Wait

As a tribute of some sort to the author, Mr. Anderson, I might state that I rushed up the aisle after the fourth scene of the last act, convinced that the show was over. Then the curtain went up and I tarried for the finish, wondering why they bothered to keep the thing going. Well, it's worth it.

Salutations to Nancy Kelly for a great performance as the mother of the little monster; to the little monster herself, Patty McCormack; added kudos to Eileen Heckart for those two compelling drunk scenes, and to Evelyn Varden, for maintaining a solid and wonderfully sane command over everything. I'm sorry, but I was unable to hear many of Thomas Chalmer's lines.

I think everybody agrees that we need a good shocker this season, and for my money this is it.

"THE BAD SEED"

Play by Maxwell Anderson, adapted from the novel by William March; staged by Reginald Denham; setting and lighting by George Jenkins; costumes by Sal Anthony; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the 46th St. Theatre, December 8, 1954. The cast:

Rhoda Penmark.....Patty McCormack
Col. Kenneth Penmark.....John O'Hare
Christine Penmark..Nancy Kelly
Monica Breedlove.....Evelyn Varden
Emory Wages...Joseph Holland
Leroy.....Henry Jones
Miss Fern.....Joan Croydon
Reginald Tasker...Lloyd Gough
Mrs. Daigle....Eileen Heckart
Mr. Daigle...Wells Richardson
Messenger.....George Gino
Richard Bravo.....Thomas Chalmers

DAILY NEWS

December 9, 1954

'The Bad Seed' a Brooding Drama About a Sweet and Evil Small Girl

By JOHN CHAPMAN

From a novel by the late William March, Maxwell Anderson has fashioned a horrifying and literary play, "The Bad Seed," and last evening the Playwrights' company gave it an excellently acted and stylishly mounted production at the 46th St. Theatre. The title role, played by 9-year-old Patty McCormack, is that of a reptile with the face of an angel—the most hellish moppet we have had around in several seasons.

The drama is fairly absorbing, even though it is occasionally more bookish than stage-ish, and it has a perfectly splendid performance by Nancy Kelly in the role of a mother whose horror grows scene by scene as she realizes the kind of child she has borne. Miss McCormack matches Miss Kelly in the impact, if not quite the artfulness, of her own impersonation.

Twists of Plot

It won't do for me to go into too much detail concerning "The Bad Seed," for this play is more for watching and listening to than reading about, and there is a twist or two of the plot—including an ending which compounds all the sweet hellishness that has gone before—which a playgoer should not know in advance.

But I can tell you that this little girl in blonde pigtails is the daughter of two nice people—an Army officer and his pretty wife. They live in a two-family house somewhere in the South. While Daddy is away on a tour of duty in Washington, Mother comes to learn, little by little, what a monster her sweet child is. Apparently, when angel-puss wants something—something trivial like a crystal bauble or a school medal that somebody else won—she gets it the easy way by murdering the owner. An old lady falls out of a building, a schoolboy drowns beneath a wharf and a handyman dies from being set afire.

And why call this play "The Bad Seed?" It is because the mother believes that she has passed on to her child some mysterious evil heritage of her own.

I haven't read the novel, but it is evident that Anderson has sought to put most of it on the stage. Thus it is that the drama has a number of digressions, including discussions of criminology and heredity, which are more exciting in intent that effect.

Other Good Players

But these digressions do serve to introduce some other capable actors—Henry Jones as an extraordinarily interesting handyman, Evelyn Varden as a gabby neighbor, Thomas Chalmers as a veteran crime reporter and Eileen Heckart as the sad and drunken mother of a boy who has been murdered.

George Jenkins' setting of a living room is a fine sunny place for dark thoughts. Reginald Denham's direction aims more for style and quality than for dramatic practicality. The performances by Miss Kelly and Miss McCormark are the most interesting and most important elements in "The Bad Seed." There hasn't been a more fiendish small girl around since "The Innocents."

New York Post

December 9, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Case of the Homicidal Child

Maxwell Anderson turns from his sad stories of the death of kings to tell a somber tale of inherited homicidal instincts in "The Bad Seed," which opened last night at the 46th St. Theater. This adaptation of the late William March's novel about a sweet and pretty child murderess is a glum and sullen drama, as filled with blackness and despair as a Graham Greene contemplation of sex and religion, and I refuse to accept its premise without more evidence than the play provides, but I think there is no denying its chilling theatrical effectiveness.

Mr. Anderson's play, which follows the story line and the pessimistic viewpoint of the March novel with remarkable fidelity, has to do with the case of a 9-year-old girl, charming, appealing and admired by her elders for her old-fashioned graces, who has calmly committed three cold-blooded murders. It is, in its outline, a suspense melodrama, and it seems to me at its best when it is showing the growing horror of the slow discovery by the child's nice mother that her polite little daughter is a frightening monster.

The Inheritors

This, however, is no more the chief concern of Mr. Anderson than it was of Mr. March when he told the story originally. The major interest of "The Bad Seed" lies in the matter of inherited characteristics, which it sees as inevitable and inescapable. For it is giving away no hidden plot secret to say that the mother, who is nominally the daughter of a benevolent newspaperman, turns out to be, without her knowledge, the child of a celebrated mass murderess, and it is the thesis of the play that the instinct for killing had been passed on to the granddaughter.

Whatever the scientific soundness of this theory may be, I doubt if the play is altogether persuasive in making it. I, for one, remain stubbornly unconvinced. But the thesis certainly makes for as pessimistic and unrelieved a tragedy as the theater could well offer. Not only is the innocent mother made to pay by suicide for the crimes of her mother and daughter, but the kindly journalist, who had adopted her out of pity for her earlier misfortune, is punished for his generosity. Mr. Anderson is hardly a cheering theatrical companion these days.

Trapped Mankind

But he hasn't lost his gift for dramatic effectiveness. In turning from the blank verse of his historical tragedies to the prose of his current work, he has employed a stark and forthright style that serves him admirably. "The Bad Seed" goes about its chilling work slowly and deliberately, but it does get its effects by combining suspense with gloomy contemplation in a manner that it is not easy to escape. Its ironic ending may send you home in gloom, but its melancholy view of trapped mankind is not to be shrugged off.

The acting is excellent. Nancy Kelly is real and moving as the doomed mother, and the childish prettiness of little Patty McCormack makes her evil ways all the more sinister. Eileen Heckart has two admirably played scenes as the bitter, drunken mother of one of the child's victims. There are especially good performances by Henry Jones as a nasty hired man, Evelyn Varden as a well-meaning neighbor given to talk about Freud, and Thomas Chalmers as the newspaperman, and the lesser roles are helpfully managed. The players add force and conviction to Mr. Anderson's bleak but striking determinism.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 9, 1954

'Bad Seed' Thriller Grows in Terror

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Bad Seed," at the 46th St., gains in size of terror as it goes along, as crazily as a tumbleweed. Because its premise is so shattering, and its leading roles so beautifully played, it is also a moving story.

It is solely and honestly meant to entertain. It has nothing whatever to prove. As purely purposeful diversion it ranks with "Dracula," and sometimes sets your spine to as much tingling.

Imagine the predicament of a mother who slowly but inescapably becomes convinced that her 8-year-old daughter is a habitual murderer.

The facts seem outlandish. Then they seem suspicious, and finally they are incontrovertible.

Traced Through Self.

The mother makes the horrifying discovery that such a child might be legitimately classed as a conscienceless throwback by certain sociologists. The heritage is directly traceable through herself.

When the situation becomes open between mother and daughter the play is all the more chilling. And the tricky finish, hateful to accept, is entirely in line with what has gone before.

Playing the long role of the harassed parent, Nancy Kelly steps overnight into the front rank of our younger emotional actresses. She has proven herself in this line before, but she has never had such big and relentless emotion to depict. I don't think anybody else in our theater could touch her for quality and intensity and the terrible, vulnerable agony she projects.

Future Lady Macbeth.

It is in a grand style, which the play needs, and beautifully done. And as her daughter 9-year-old Patty McCormack may turn up any year now as Judith Anderson's understudy as Lady Macbeth.

This pretty little blonde in starched dimity looks like the model for an angel, and acts like one when the occasion requires it. Then suddenly she embraces her mother and stares out into space with such malevolent anger that you begin looking around for the nearest exit, just in case.

Evelyn Varden has a wonderfully sure touch as she delivers her impertinent comic observations on life and love. As always, her entrances are all guarantees of honest, sensible and inventive acting.

Eileen Heckart has a showy role as the drunken mother of a little boy who has suspiciously drowned on a picnic. It won her two huge hands last night. This seems to me curious, except that drunks often excite audiences to loud encouragement. The role should be heartbreaking, and Miss Heckart is apparently directed to play it for broad laughs.

A Dependable, Accurate Source of Information of the American Theatre
NEW YORK
THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

Daily Mirror
December 9, 1954

'Bad Seed' a Dramatic Smash at 46th Street

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Playwrights' Company came out of a recent batting slump Wednesday evening and hit a homer with Maxwell Anderson's "The Bad Seed." It was adapted from a novel by William March, which we haven't read. It should be packing the 46th Street Theatre for months to come, and that's a right big house.

• • •

"THE BAD SEED" is a terrifying melodrama. It has to do with an eight-year-old girl who looks like an angel, but is as diabolical as a devil. She commits three murders and gets away with them, two in fits of pique and a third to cover a previous crime.

When her mother realizes she has a little monster on her hands, she gives her pretty but psychopathic offspring an overdose of sleeping pills, and then takes her own life. Ironically, the clever brat is saved, and we came away wondering which of the unsuspecting neighbors would be the next to meet a sudden end.

Take "The Bad Seed" as a horror play, a fascinating thriller, and you will be kept on the edge of your seat. We suspect that March and Anderson meant it to have sociological implications, but just forget this and you'll shiver like this victim of the virus has been doing for several days past.

• • •

THE MOTHER, it turns out, is adopted, the daughter of a cunning murderess. The moral would seem to be that her child is a victim of heredity, skipping one generation. This is a switch on modern psychological teachings, which have been attributing juvenile delinquency to environment. Frankly, we think a bad 'un is a bad 'un, whether you blame its misdeeds on descent or surroundings.

Though nine-year-old Patty McCormack, who etches the baby killer with the skill and assurance of a veteran trouper, doesn't have her name in especially big type in the program. We think she should. Here is pretending of a high order, and from one so young. Perhaps author Anderson and director Reginald Denham didn't want to give her delusions of grandeur at such a tender age.

Nancy Kelly, who has the marquee lights, as the despairing and heartbroken mother, eminently merits them. For it is she who brings tremendous emotional impact to a tragic chronicle of disillusionment. And it takes a bit of doing to hold one's own on the same stage with a junior genius like Miss McCormack.

EVELYN VARDEN is quite wonderful as a doting landlady, completely taken in by the surface sweetness of her malicious little tenant. Give Miss Varden a decent comedy line, and she will transmute it into shimmering gold. Eileen Heckart, one of our favorite actresses, is magnificent as the drunken, suspicious mother who has lost her child at the hands of the petulant little fiend.

Henry Jones, a first-rate character actor, is excellent as a phychotic handyman, who recognizes his own ilk when he sees it. And salutes must go to John O'Hare, Joseph Holland, Joan Croydon, Lloyd Gough, Wells Richardson and Thomas Chalmers in other roles. They make the most of opportunities provided them by Anderson and Denham.

"The Bad Seed" is a tense, macabre, frightening study in infantile infamy. It is the first dramatic smash of the season. It is beautifully played in a handsome setting by George Jenkins.

The New York Times
December 9, 1954

The Theatre: 'Bad Seed' Presented

Homicidal Child Prowls 46th Street Stage

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERYONE who read the late William March's "The Bad Seed" was horrified and terrified. That is likely to be the case with playgoers who see Maxwell Anderson's drama version, which opened at the Forty-sixth Street Wednesday evening.

For it is the story of a psychotic little girl who commits three murders and lives so that she can commit some more whenever they may be convenient. Written with reserve and skill, acted with reticence and dexterity, "The Bad Seed" is an extraordinarily literate horror story and a superior bit of theatre.

•

Little Rhoda Penmark is the evil queen of the story. On the surface, she is sweet, charming, full of old-fashioned graces, loved by her parents, admired by all her elders. But Rhoda's mother has an uneasy feeling about her. When one of Rhoda's schoolmates is mysteriously drowned at a picnic, Mrs. Penmark is alarmed. For the boy who was drowned was the one who had won the penmanship medal that Rhoda felt she deserved.

There is a lot more to the story than it would be fair to report here. It involves the psychology of crime, whether or not the impulse for murder can be inherited. It involves a mysterious murder farther back in Rhoda's infamous career, and a gruesome murder later on when she fears that she is being trapped.

•

But the plot is not the only virtue of the play. For "The Bad Seed" is a perceptive drama that is equally interested in the frightful tragedy of a mother who takes the responsibility for her daughter's guilt, continues to love her daughter and tries desperately and selflessly to administer justice to everyone. It is a shattering story, largely because it involves such decent people.

Under the direction of Reginald Denham, an old hand at crime plays, the performance has considerable distinction. In view of the monstrosities it discloses, it has remarkable grace and quality. Mr. Denham does not let the horror overwhelm the characterizations.

As Rhoda, little Patty McCormack has the central part which she plays to perfection. Fastidiously dressed, wearing neat braids, she plays with a girlish innocence that is also inscrutably cold. She slides out of the charm and into the villainy and back into the charm again almost imperceptibly. And when she comes on happily in the last scene to hug her father, there is not a trace of the malevolence at the roots of her character. Little Miss McCormack gives a superb performance.

•

Superb performances are the general standard. As the troubled mother who tries to atone for her child's crimes, Nancy Kelly gives the finest performance of her career. It describes first suspicion and then agony as integral parts of character development, for Miss Kelly never lets the part get out of control.

Eileen Heckart has two brilliant scenes as the desperate mother of the boy who was drowned. Miss Heckart plays them magnificently—never losing the private agony of the mother in the rush of drunken conversation. Evelyn Varden is immensely entertaining and compassionate, too, as a garrulous neighbor with a big heart and an awareness of other people.

•

Henry Jones as a feeble minded choreman with a preternatural insight into evil; Joan Croydon as a professionally discreet schoolmistress; Joseph Holland as a genial, slightly detached neighbor; Lloyd Gough as a literary specialist in crime; Wells Richardson as a patient, ineffectual husband to a distraught wife—all give performances with flavor and the appropriate emphases. As Mrs. Penmark's father, Thomas Chalmers gives an affectionate, relaxed performance, though he was talking largely to himself last evening. An actor with one of the most resonant voices in the business was frequently inaudible.

The whole play takes place inside a soothing Southern living room designed in good taste by George Jenkins. Like the setting, the play looks genteel. But the tale it has to tell is chillingly inhuman. Mr. Anderson has told it with power, insight and skill.